

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today is often called Good Shepherd Sunday. After all, the Psalm assigned for today is the 23rd Psalm: *“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”* You probably know it well enough to recite it. We sang it today as a hymn: “The King of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never.” When we get to the prayers, we’ll pray to the Lord regarding “the Shepherd of [His] sheep,” asking Him by His Spirit to help us to know the Shepherd who knows us each by name and to follow “the voice of our Shepherd.” We heard Peter refer to Jesus as *“the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”* And we might remember that in John chapter 10 Jesus refers to Himself as the Good Shepherd.

Yet we didn’t hear those words today. Jesus does talk about shepherds today, but He Himself is not the one He identifies as *“the shepherd of the sheep”* in today’s text. He uses another *“figure of speech”* for Himself in the opening verses of John chapter 10. Explaining this figure, He tells us that He is the Door of the sheep, that salvation is through Him, that He came to give life abundantly.

Now this instruction follows right on the heels of Jesus’ miraculous healing of the man born blind, and was especially directed to the Pharisees, the religious leaders who, Jesus said, were spiritually blind. These Pharisees rejected Jesus, calling Him a sinner for healing on the Sabbath; they rejected following Jesus saying, we’re disciples of Moses, instead. Although they could see physically, they were spiritually blind, as Jesus taught: *“For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind”* (John 9:39).

Using these figures of speech—of Himself as the Door, of true shepherds versus thieves and robbers—Jesus taught about His Church, that is, about *“the holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd”* (Smalcald Articles, III, XII, 2), and about the pastors, the shepherds, who lead His flock.

In their blindness, the Pharisees *“did not understand what he was saying to them,”* but we who are sheep do. We are not dumb sheep, as sheep are often called. We are sheep who know the difference between abiding in the sheepfold and being stolen away. We know the difference between life through faith in Jesus Christ, who came to give the abundance of eternal life, and death at the hands of thieves and robbers who come to steal and kill and destroy.

We hear Jesus teaching us today. “Not every person who is in the sheepfold and calls out to the sheep is necessarily a shepherd. Some may actually be thieves who have crawled over the wall into the pen, and who are intent not on helping the sheep and protecting them but stealing them and destroying them.” We hear Jesus saying, “Beware,” even as St. Paul warned the Ephesians to watch out for

“men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” “Be alert,” he says (Acts 20:30-31).

We are listening! We are not dumb sheep. We know there are people out there who do not care about us or want what is best for us. There are those who want only to enrich themselves and don't mind doing it at our expense. Even in this pandemic, we are being warned about the scammers seeking to steal away what is rightly ours.

And we know that what is true outside the sheepfold is true also within that sheepfold. There are thieves and robbers who have climbed over the walls in order to steal away your spiritual riches, to kill your hope, to destroy your faith.

The true shepherd, on the other hand, is the one who has entered by the Door, not by an authority in himself, but by the authority of God the Holy Spirit who has placed him in the preaching office he holds. He is to be a shepherd, your pastor, for that's what a pastor is—a shepherd who tends Christ's sheep, leading them through Jesus into the sheepfold for safety and out of it for plush pasture.

The true shepherd enters by the Door, as Jesus said, *“he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens.”* That is, true pastors are those who are rightly called into this office, as our Confessions say, *“no one may publicly preach or teach or administer the sacraments unless he has been rightly called”* (Augsburg Confession, XIV). This call assures the sheep that he is their shepherd who has entered through the Door, and not a thief who has climbed over the fence.

Moreover, this office is the office that the Door Himself instituted in the days after His resurrection: *“As the Father has sent me, even so, I am sending you,”* Jesus said (John 20:21). And, *“Go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them ... and teaching them”* (Matt. 28:19-20). Jesus establishes this office for the good of the flock, that the sheep might hear the voice of the shepherd and follow Him.

And again, the sheep are not dumb. They know their shepherd's voice. They can distinguish between a pastor that leads them to Christ, to His green pastures, to His still waters, and one that is in it only for himself, for true shepherds often must begin with a hard word, reminding them that they are ever *“straying sheep,”* always wandering off the paths of righteousness, wanting to follow their own way. A true shepherd calls his sheep to repentance and to the *“Shepherd and Overseer of [their] souls.”* Moreover, the true shepherd does not leave His flock with law and condemnation, but speaks a word of Gospel, pointing his flock to the Shepherd who *“laid down His life for the sheep,”* to the perfect sacrifice who *“committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth,”* who hanging on the tree *“was reviled and did not revile in return,”* who *“suffered for you,”* yet *“when He suffered, did*

not threaten” in return. Yes, true shepherds preach THE Shepherd who *“bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.”* They preach that by His *“wounds [we] have been healed.”*

This is the good news. By baptism you have been brought into the sheepfold, sins washed away. By holy absolution, you are forgiven again and again in Him who laid down His life unto death for you that you might *“have life and have it abundantly.”* By the words of Scripture read and expounded, you are led through the Door to the pasture of Christ's flesh and blood found in the holy Supper and to salvation. This is what God's flock has always been about; it's what we've always devoted ourselves to.

In the last few weeks, God's flock has seemed scattered, fleeing from an unseen, but deadly pestilence. O little flock, fear not this foe, nor the liar and murderer who brought it about. Fear not! You are safe in confines of Christ's sheepfold, the Church. Remember, O Christians, though we die, yet shall we live! So, take heart. On the other hand, it is time for God's flock to return to the green pastures and the still water of the Divine Service. It's time to hear again the “living voice of Christ,” not mediated by YouTube, but in the person of your pastor, as Jesus said, *“The one who hears you hears me”* (Luke 10:16). And that's what's going to happen starting next Sunday.

Now, we're not going to let our guard down. Your shepherd means you no harm; I want you to stay safe and healthy—but not just physically; spiritually, especially. So, beginning next Sunday, we will meet again, still heeding the warnings of the doctors; still taking our precautions. It won't quite be “back to normal,” yet—I refuse to accept a “new normal.” We will get back to normal. There will still be an online service put up for those who for the sake of their health cannot yet come, but that service will be the Divine Service recorded on Sunday, and put up later that day or Monday—just as soon as Mike can get it up.

But for those who can, I invite you, I encourage you, to gather as God's flock. We'll have two services to start out: 8:30 and 10:00 AM, and we'll limit the number in each by using our online signup. Of course, you can always call the office to sign up., Regardless, whether earlier or later, I look forward to seeing many of you again inside these doors, that you may be led in and out through THE Door to salvation and life.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!